

Conference Paper

Section 2. Transformation of Cultural Values in the Information Age

Visual Representations of Traditional Northern Communities in Ethnographic Film: Historical and Modern Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper investigates the ethnographic films about the indigenous peoples of the North, moving from the visual representations of the North produced in the Soviet state to the new discourses of post-Soviet Russian documentary films. By demonstrating how the representations of traditional ethnocultural communities of the North have evolved over time in Russian documentary, the authors focus on the contemporary documentary film *Oil Field* (Oil Field; Ivan Golovnev 2012), which depicts a life of the family Piak (Nenets Vasily Piak and his Khanty wife, Svetlana) in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug—Yugra. Authors came to conclusion that ethnographic cinema would be considered as a cultural mediator: it is both reflectively represents the reality of the traditional culture and contributes some of the most lasting visual formulae with regard to the way the indigenous populations of the Far North are framed and remembered.

Keywords: ethnographic film, indigenous peoples of the North, reindeer herding, oil industry, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia

1. The Northern Ethnocultural Communities on Screen

Ethnographic documentary films are important agents that shape audiences' views about how the North is seen. According to Karl Heider, the value of an ethnographic film is directly proportional to the value of the research and of the analyses which precede the research [Heider]. Ethnographic vision helps to structure and assemble, to define and store not only activities and rituals, but entire communities on film. The ethnographic form of non-fiction cinema was defined most powerfully by Robert Flaherty's *Nannok of the North* (1922), which explored cinema's potential to provide an illusion of unobstructed access to the "life of others". *Nannok of the North* established a number of the visual

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and conceptual conventions of the ethnographic cinema and received a warm welcome from Soviet film-makers.

Since 1920th many ethnographic and educational films dedicated to the material and spiritual culture of the indigenous populations of the North had been released in Russia. The presentation of northern minorities in early Soviet films followed an “ethnographic principle” that focused on everyday practices, provided a powerful tool for visualizing diversity and demonstrating desired developments and achievements (Dziga Vertov’s film *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), Vladimir Erofeev and Vera Popova’s film *Beyond the Arctic Circle* (1927). In those films the landscape, which northern communities inhabited was imagined as a complex composite: an underdeveloped territory rich in material resources, a home to endangered people, a vulnerable frontier, and the futuristic venue for an anticipated economic miracle [Alexandrov; Sarkisova]. Nomadic life was portrayed as an unbreakable union with nature, a lifestyle that is seemingly unchanged over the centuries. Scenes of the daily life of the nomads underlined the cultural distance from urban “civilized” audience. These films in the 1920th fell under umbrella term *kulturfilm*, which understood as propagandist and didactic films. Filmed in expeditions to various parts of the Soviet Union, kulturfilms taught audience about the remote and exotic places as parts of a new “motherland”.

In the post–World War II era, indigenous northern communities continued to be shown as the beneficiaries of Soviet policies; the films produced images of new school buildings, hospitals, and cultural houses, while emphasizing the preservation of identity through the demonstration on screen of the elements of traditional culture (*Boarding School for the Peoples of the North, USSR, 1958; The Tale of the Komi Land* Yuri Mogilevsev, USSR, 1967; *Feast of the North*, Rafail Gol’din, USSR, 1970; *Years Like Centuries*, Igor Gelein, USSR, 1978). These films continued to employ Soviet-era visual conventions of representing minorities and actively used the metaphor “the North” as the concept of imaginary geography. Films combined travelogue, adventure and ethnography to feature the landscape of the Far North as a space of habitual, economic and ethnic practices.

New generation of the ethnographic films in post-Soviet era (*Seven Songs from the Tundra, Finland, 1999; A Bride of the Seventh Heaven, Finland, 2003; Mothers of Life, Finland, 2002* by Anastasia Lapsui; *Yaptik-Hasse, Russia, 2006* by Edgar Bartenev) are considered to be participatory and reflexive modes of filmmaking [Nichols]. All these films focus on nomadic lifestyle (deer, chum (tent), children playing with dogs, malitsa (men’s hooded leather clothes), family eating raw meat or sleeping in a tightly packed tent) with tendency to idealize patriarchal nomadic traditions. For example, films of

indigenous film-maker Aleksei Vakhrushev (*The Time When Dreams Melt Russia*, 1993–96; *Birds of Naukan, Russia*, 1996; *The Island, Russia*, 2001; *Chukotkan Cossacks, Russia*, 2003; *The Walrus Tusk Chronicles, Russia*, 2004; *The Hunter of Cold Shores, Russia*, 2005; *The Factory of Miracles, Russia*, 2005–08; *Welcome to Enurmino, Russia*, 2008), *The Tundra Book: A Tale of Vukvukai the Little Rock, Russia*, 2011) have moved away from the socialist-era rhetoric; they are also addressing the traumas of forced resettlement, repressions, and collectivization that resulted in the destruction of indigenous cultural practices. The *Tundra Book* includes the dramatic episodes portraying a violent subversion of the traditional hierarchy of values and practices among deer-breeding Chukchi (schoolchildren departing for boarding school). Thus, the breakup of the Soviet Union spurred the search for new languages of self-representations. Instead of panoramic vision and the de-individualized static figures within landscape (colonial narrative), in post-Soviet documentary film-makers often uses visually striking camerawork and multiple close-ups to emphasize the unity of people and nature and avoids commentary or authorial presence on-screen. The international success of the films about North demonstrates the readiness of international viewers to consume the patriarchal nomadic images of ethnic Others.

2. Contemporary View: "Oil Field" Documentary

The analysis of the ethnographic cinema on the North in the present time in this article will be related with the *Oil Field* documentary made by Ivan Golovnev in 2012.

The purpose of this study is the discussion of the problems and the narratives relating to the traditional culture of the ethnic communities of the North brought to the foreground in the *Oil Field* documentary, analysis of the film shooting process as well as an invitation to a discussion of the question to what extent (if at all) may an ethnographic film play the role of cultural intermediary in addressing the subject of conflicts between the oil industry and the local population in relation to the land use practices and the natural resource management in the north of Siberia. The methodological basis for the study is a proposition that the visual images and the personal (author's) narratives may efficiently complement each other as two different types of knowledge [Lotman].

The *Oil Field* documentary is the final part of a trilogy about the Khanty - the indigenous people of the taiga and the forest-tundra territories of northern Siberia. The film was preceded with two other parts of the trilogy made by the same director - Ivan Golovnev - in the territory of the Beloyarski district of the Khanty-Mansiysk AO - *Tiny Katherine* (2004) and *Old man Peter* (2008). These parts of trilogy portrayed children or

elderly people as the embodiment of indigenous culture and traditional lifestyle, while the *Oil Field* focuses on the middle-aged generation, showing his protagonists as active agents of change.

The production of the *Oil Field* was sponsored by the Khanty-Mansiysk Museum of Nature and Man in connection with its work on the production of the audiovisual score for the permanent museum exhibition "Link of Times". The *Oil Field* documentary was part of the contest program of various film festivals (Jean Rouch Ethnographic Film Festival, ethnographic film festival "Ethnorama", etc.) and won numerous festival awards (Best film about the indigenous peoples at the International Anthropological Film Festival in Parnu, Estonia, 2013; a prize for the best camera work at the 1st Finno-Ugric International Film Festival, Estonia, 2014, etc.).

Main personages of the *Oil Field* were a husband and wife living in the forest-tundra - Vasily Piak (a Nenets) and Svetlana Piak (a Khanty). Vasily was an enthusiastic builder, who had at his disposal the saws, shaving planes, and a sawmill for making boards. His plan was to build a "street of structures" (a bath house, an annex to the house, the sheds) in the woodland. At the same time Vasily was an experienced herder, their family herd stood out for its size and quality, the deer - for their particular trimness and beauty. The life of Vasily's wife - Svetlana was marked by the traditional for this culture "feminine" occupations: assisting her husband in his work, taking care of the household, cooking and sewing. The Piak family herd consisted of over 100 deer and was considered quite large by the local standards. Vasily truly loved the deer, knew well their habits and needs, was attentive to every animal and even composed poems, many of which were about the deer.

*A deer is my life,
To me the deer is all!
Transport, shoes,
dress, and product.
A deer came to you -
caress, be tender with it.
Great happiness it is - to rush in a sled
Into the enticing depth of the tundra.*

Actually, the *Oil Field* documentary is articulated in the language of cinematography statement of the feelings and the current problems of the indigenous peoples of the North under the conditions of the rapid industrial development of the northern territories.

Geographically the film was set in the north of the Beloyarskij district of the Khanty-Mansiysk AO, in the territory of the natural park Numto, where the conflict between the indigenous population and the oilmen was unfolded. In 1999 "Surgutneftegaz" (one of the so-called 'big four' oil production giants in Russia) obtained a license to perform drilling works in the territory of the national park "Numto" including some of its nature conservation areas. The authorities intended to build a solid concrete highway in place of the already existing temporary winter road connecting the oil fields and oil companies shift camps with the urbanized territories. According to project plan this highway was supposed to cross the territories of the ancient communal family lands and the sacred places of the Khanty and the Nenets.

The hero of the film expressed his attitude towards what happened in the following poetic way:

*Many concrete, winter and other roads
Are laid and more will be built.
With iron monsters in vanguard running
Roaring over the tundra with the power of the motors

Steamrolling the land on the way
Still conquering the already conquered Siberia.
Over the local herders camps
And the indigenous family lands
Spread the branches of oil pipes.

And I still wonder, still know not
Which way to go.
Where could I
In peace and calm live with my deer.*

In fact, the hero of the film, who recited his own poems from the screen, brought to the surface something subconscious, something that had a great ethnographic value. An anthropological film in general implies "the involvement which is not static (iconographic), but dynamic, meaning a joint experience of a difficult journey, the hero has to make, with all its turns and dead-ends, rather than just the moment (a still frame) of success" [Golovnev, p. 14]. The film visualized the people of Kazym whose story would otherwise remain at best a part of a research project invisible to the general public.

The director follows his protagonist both at home and outdoors; his camera remains at eye level with minimal horizontal and vertical pans, avoiding aerial perspectives. This method provides for a researcher's active involvement in the daily life of the "informants", as a rule, implying his close contacts with them during the long periods of field work [Gruber, p. 51]. The film director's "observing camera" [Macdougall] was used in the several filming expeditions over a long period of time – from 2008 to 2012 – with the purpose of capturing and telling the unfolding story of the life of the personages in the changing seasons and environments to provide a maximum coverage of different forms of their economic practices, fishing and hunting expeditions, and other processes in the routine life of a herders' camp.

The *Oil Field* documentary in addition to telling a story of the life of a particular family in a herders' camp, also raised the topical questions about the coexistence within one culture of the different life styles and the ways of life. It appears that in this sense it may well fulfill the role of a cultural intermediary in addressing the problems of the conflict relationships between the oilmen and the local population with regard to land management issues in the north of Siberia. Contrary to the currently dominant *par excellence exposure* style of the North depiction, the *Oil Field* shows the real life of the traditional ethno-cultural communities of the North and, in that way, it offers a significant expressive means of "representation, mediation and understanding of the culture" [Ginsburg, p. 65]. Also, as Terence Turner once said, the ethnographic films about the indigenous peoples by themselves offered a potential for the cultural activism manifestation [Turner].

In the light of the above the use of the ethnographic films as a kind of a cultural intermediary for the discussion of the subject of conflict between the oil industry and the indigenous population appears quite justified: we are talking here about the creation of some visual narrative with a view of its further application in the actual social practices. An ethnographic film, rather than providing a reflexive description of the existing situation within a traditional culture, claims to be instrumental in its organization and reorganization. At the same time, ethnographic films are made with the intention of acting as a cultural intermediary in addressing social problems": all elements of the film content should be organized in a way to carry the specific "cultural messages". It appears that, on the one hand, the information layers revealed in the course of the anthropological study of the *Oil Field* documentary (the demonstration of the life of the real people instead of the fictional personages; the appeal to the idea of the "naturalness" and the harmony of the people with their native environment; the understanding of oil rather as an extended metaphor, than simply an economic

resource; the shifting of the accent from the external exotics to the inner meaning, etc.) reflect its multi-component research content. And on the other, they carry the important cross-cultural elements to which greater attention should be drawn in the real life, and which could help to avoid many of the destructive actions standing in the way of finding efficient solutions to the problems of land and natural resources management, and the evolution of the traditional cultures in the modern North of Siberia.

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